



## **The Promise After by L. Raquel**

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**Summary:** "Mike has never heard her, or anyone, for that matter, just wail with such utter despair that it sends a knife straight through his heart. His only coherent thought is that he has to find her, right now." Mileven one-shot; takes place the night of 3x08 (The Battle of Starcourt). If you like angst or fluff, this may be right up your alley.

## 1. Chapter 1

When she sees Will get up, El knows they've come back.

She cranes her neck from where she's sitting, looking over the crowd of soldiers to see Will run to his mother. Within seconds, the two are joined in a tight embrace, crying with relief. The sight makes her heart hurt and she wants to run and hug Joyce too, but El immediately notices.

He's not with her.

El's heartbeat starts to quicken as she stands up and begins looking around. *He...he must be somewhere else.*

The soldiers are everywhere, walking all over, and El is looking in every direction trying to see around them. Every second that passes by seems to stretch longer as her chest begins to tighten. There was no sign of him.

El feels a panic begin to bubble inside her, threatening to boil over as she frantically looks in the distance, trying to see if anyone was coming from further away. Although her eyes are still desperately searching for him, there is a deep, undeniable pit in her stomach that's telling her something is *wrong*.

All that is needed to confirm that feeling, is the terrible moment when El locks eyes with Joyce.

She looks at Joyce, and although her face is partially covered by Will's shoulder, she sees the message in her eyes immediately.

At first, there's a hint of reluctance in them. Almost like what's about to come next is unavoidable, but still unbearable.

Then. It's there, in Joyce's eyes. She doesn't have to say a single word, the message is written clear as day across her expression.

*I'm so sorry.*

And just like that, the panic that has been threatening to boil over in

El fizzles out in one second and is replaced with something else entirely.

All-consuming, uncontainable grief.

It fills her entire body as El takes in the gravity of Joyce's message. Her eyesight blurring with tears, she all-but whispers, "No."

No.

*He can't be gone.*

She stares back at Joyce and the expression is still there as tears begin welling up in her eyes, too.

*He's gone.*

El feels her heart slowly ripping out of her chest, piece by piece, as she fully processes what's happening. What *happened*.

She's shaking. Every limb.

*Hopper isn't coming back.*

Her throat burns. Her head throbs.

All she can see through the blur of her own tears is the black of the night. Her vision darkens as a feeling of unbearable pain, pure *agony* takes over her entire body. The black sky morphs into a black hole as her knees begin to crumble underneath her.

The black hole takes her. It swallows her up into the infinite *nothingness*.

Her ears are ringing, she's dizzy, and the black hole has sucked every last ounce of warmth out of her body. She's completely and utterly *empty*.

Before she knows it, she's on the ground. Although she hates it, wants to deny it, the words flash through her mind, brighter than the neon logo on the outside of Starcourt.

*Gone. Hopper is gone.*

Without trying to, without even *realizing* it, El opens her mouth and lets out a heartbreakingly desperate, terrible scream.

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When he hears it, Mike swears he has never felt his stomach drop so fast.

He has never felt his heart rate go from normal to nearly pounding out of his chest in a matter of seconds.

All the hair on the back of Mike's neck stands up when he hears the scream.

It's a heartbreakingly desperate, terrible scream. And the worst part is, it belongs to El.

He knows that scream better than anyone. He heard it when Billy had almost choked her to death in the pool bathhouse. He heard it when she had encountered the Mindflayer in the void, threatening to destroy her and everyone she cared about. He heard it when she had to get that God-awful thing out of her leg, sweating and shaking on the slick tile floors of Starcourt Mall.

But despite El going through some serious, *real* trauma those past couple days, this is different. This scream is unparalleled.

Mike has never heard her, or anyone, for that matter, just *wail* with such utter despair that it sends a knife straight through his heart.

Something is wrong. Something is *very* wrong.

His only coherent thought is that he has to find her, *right now*.

*"She was just with me in the back of the ambulance, she couldn't have gone far,"* He reasons. He gets up and looks at the scene before him, searching desperately for that black and yellow shirt. But there are soldiers everywhere blocking his view, and with every second that passes by, the feeling of trepidation and panic grows stronger and stronger, threatening to overtake his senses. *Where the hell is she?*

Mike frantically turns in every direction. He's panting, sweating. Still, no El. He feels his stomach churn, and his vision goes dark for a second as a wave of nausea hits him. His panic is too much to be contained inside of him, and it's manifesting itself physically. Stars dance in his vision, but he can't tell which ones are real, glimmering above the helicopters circling the night sky, or just fragments of his distressed mind.

He feels his breath coming quicker and quicker as he walks further away from the ambulance, tears springing to his eyes as he realizes that he might be too late. What if someone took her? What if...

*What if she's...*

No.

No. It can't be. Mike's version of the universe only makes sense when there's El. The grass is green, the sun is a star, and El Hopper just *is*. She can't be gone. Not after losing her for a year.

But his mind can't push the thought away. Even as he puts all of his mental strength into looking around once more for that beautiful, bright, stupid black and yellow shirt. He can't escape it now. The prospect of El being gone, *really gone*, is threatening to drown him and he feels like he's losing hope and he can't even *breathe* and...

Joyce.

He sees Joyce, and Mike gasps for air as he realizes he's been holding his breath.

It's not El, but it's someone who could help find her. Someone who might know if she's okay.

She's about fifty yards away, and Mike can only see the back of her head. But it's her, without a doubt.

Without even realizing it, he's running. He's pushing soldiers out of the way, keeping his eyes trained on Joyce the entire time.

As he approaches closer, he sees another person with Joyce. Will.

But Will himself is not what worries him. What worries him is the expression on Will's face.

He's crying, and he and his mother are both crouching over someone. He has another emotion on his face that Mike can't quite put his finger on until he finally registers what it is.

It's empathy, but it's the worst kind. It's the kind of empathy that is mixed with inescapable despair because whatever happened is horrific and *permanent*.

Mike is confused for a split second until he sees who Will and Joyce are hovering over.

He sees it. He sees that black and yellow shirt.

*El.*

Suddenly, he's only ten feet away and he can hear her sobbing and his throat begins to close up again. He can't breathe. Something happened.

Something bad.

Joyce turns around and she has a similar expression to Will's, but relief floods her eyes when she sees Mike. She opens her mouth to say something, but Mike doesn't hear her as he's already running those last ten steps and all he can register is *El*.

When he gets to her, she's crumpled on the ground. He can't see her face. Joyce is resting a hand on her back, and Will is gripping her shoulder. She's *shaking* with sobs. Mike breathes out in relief of the fact that she's here, she's *alive*, but his chest tightens painfully because she's hurting. And he wants nothing more than to immediately take her in his arms and make everything go away, all the pain, but he knows he can't and he despises himself for it.

He forces himself to rip his eyes away from her to look at Joyce. In his eyes is the inevitable question. *What happened?*

Joyce stifles a sob and looks down. She bites her lip, looks back up at Mike, and manages to let out one word.

"Hop..."

Mike takes in a shaky breath as another wave of nausea comes over him. "He..."

Joyce nods. This time, she's unable to choke back her sob. It comes on full force, and she lowers her face onto Will's shoulder. She just *loses it*. Will squeezes his mom's hand as fresh tears come to the surface.

Mike takes in a shaky inhale as his brain tries to catch up with everything that he just witnessed. First, he thought El was hurt. Then, he thought El was kidnapped, or worse, dead. Then, he found Joyce and Will, hovering over a sobbing El. And, finally, he learned what had actually happened. He feels the tears begin rolling as a flash of anger, hopelessness, guilt, and agony rushes at him all at once. Hopper is dead. Gone.

He wants to let it all out. He wants to scream at the utter unfairness of the world and how out of all people *El* did not deserve this. She doesn't deserve to lose the person that kept her safe and warm and fed and made her feel *wanted*. He wants to hit himself because he knows he's been a complete asshole to Hop on a number of occasions, letting his teenage hormones get the best of him. Most of all, though, he wants to cry. Cry endlessly for the fact that the love of his life just lost her father and there's absolutely nothing he can do about it.

But he does none of those things.

He swallows his own emotions in the pure pursuit of staying strong for El. Because she needs him. She can't have him fall apart on her, too.

So, Mike wipes his tears away with the back of his hand and helps Joyce get El to sit up as Will calls for a stretcher. Her leg is still in bad shape, and as much as Mike *hates* the fact she has to visit a hospital tonight, they have no choice. When he sees her face, his chest feels like it's being torn open all over again. Tear tracks line her soft cheeks. Her nose is visibly red, and her soft brown eyes are swollen. He's doing everything in his power to hold himself together. El lays against him, saying nothing and only sniffling slightly.

He wipes his tears away again when El whimpers in pain as she's lifted onto a stretcher and rolled into the back of an ambulance. He doesn't hesitate to follow her, even when an EMT stops him and says "I'm sorry, only parents of the patient are allowed." But one look and a few harsh words from Joyce, and she's following Mike and Will into the back of the vehicle.

He wipes his tears away once more when El reaches for his hand in the ambulance when the doctor is explaining that she's going to need stitches and antibiotics for the infection. She has a faraway look, she's staring at the ceiling with almost no expression in her eyes, but when Mike entwines his fingers with hers, she squeezes Mike's hand ever-so-slightly.

He tries, desperately tries not to let the tears come when El is getting her stitches. She winces when they numb her leg with the needle and squeezes Mike's hand, tighter this time. She's still looking at the ceiling. She still hasn't said a word.

When El finally receives the antibiotics she'll be taking over the next week, she's cleared to leave the hospital. She's not allowed to walk on her leg, so she has to be taken out on a wheelchair. Mike desperately wants to hold her up again, use all his strength to support her, feel her pressed against his side, but he knows that's not the best option right now.

Even in the wheelchair, El still doesn't let go of Mike's hand.

Jonathan pulls up in the parking lot to take them home. Nancy had driven him in the Wheeler station wagon to pick up his own car. "Okay, Will, open the door and Mike and I can help El get in," Joyce says softly after Jonathan puts the car in park. The exhaustion from the day is evident in everyone, and the grief added to that was not making it any better.

Will slowly swings the door open and makes way for Mike and Joyce to gently lift El into the car. Mike sits down next to her as quickly as possible, already feeling anxious having to let go of her hand for a second.

He looks at her, and she still has the same faraway look in her eyes.

She hasn't made eye contact with *anyone* or said one word. She simply slumps against Mike's side and stares out the window.

On the ride home, El doesn't move a muscle, spare her letting her head rest on Mike's shoulder as she finally gives in to her exhaustion. This time, it's Mike who gently squeezes her hand as her heavy eyelids flutter closed.

By the time Jonathan pulls into the Byers' driveway, El is asleep. Mike doesn't want to wake her. It's the first time she's looked peaceful this entire night. But they have to get her back into the wheelchair and into the house, and the prospect of stirring her from her sleep might be unavoidable.

Joyce turns around to the backseat where Mike, El, and Will are sitting. "Will, honey, can you- can you open the door again and Mike and I-"

"Yeah, mom, I gotcha." Will knows what needs to be done and he knows his poor mother is so fatigued she can barely get her words out.

The four do the same process again- just backward this time, and it's easier with Jonathan helping out. Within a minute or so, El is being wheeled into the Byers home. She's awake, now, still looking into space with an empty, expressionless gaze.

"Mom, El can stay in my room. I'll take the couch," Jonathan offers.

"Thank you, sweetie." Joyce takes her boy in her arms and allows herself to rest against him for a moment.

When she pulls away, she looks at Mike and Will. "Okay, let's get El into bed. If there's anyone here that needs to rest, it's her."

They wheel her into Jonathan's room and gently lift her limp and fatigued body onto Jonathan's mattress. Mike immediately sits on the edge beside her. But she's facing away from him, and she doesn't move, and he can't help the lump that forms in his throat.

Will and Joyce get up to leave, knowing that Mike might be the only person that could be a source of comfort to El in an event like this. It

just makes sense; he was the first person she ever truly trusted. And all the countless times El felt terrified and alone in the void, she called out Mike's name and Mike's name only.

Before Joyce shuts the door, she whispers, "Mike, Jonathan can drive you home in a bit." Although it's late, she knows he can't leave right away.

"Thank you." Joyce reaches to shut the door, but Mike stops her. "Mrs. Byers?"

She looks at him, questioning.

"I'm—I'm so sorry." Mike manages to get the words out shakily. But he had to say it. *She lost him, too.*

A few tears come to her eyes as she nods. She doesn't have to say anything back, but she looks at him in a way that lets him understand her gratitude. Gently, she shuts the door.

And, for the first time that night, Mike and El are alone.

Looking at El, knowing how much pain she's in, Mike feels his heart ache. He's unsure of what to do. He doesn't know whether to say something, or to touch her, or to just do nothing and be with her. *She's gone through so much and she's so tired, maybe I shouldn't even...*

Mike jumps when he feels something touch his hand that he had resting on the bed. It's El. She's reaching for him.

Mike gladly takes El's hand in his own. She's still facing away from him, but he's grateful he can at least have this small physical contact, feel the warmth of her palm radiating from her skin onto his. Anything to just be in her presence.

God, he really does love her. He loves her *so much*. The words had slipped out in the cabin before he even realized it. He was so worried about her getting hurt and he was so *angry* and he hadn't meant to say it in front of everyone, but it was the truth. Even now, just holding her hand, it was pouring out of every vein, every ounce of him wants to say it.

But he knows better than to express that now, or anytime soon. Even though those three words are practically screaming to be emancipated, to let the world know that Mike Wheeler loves El Hopper more than anything he's ever known, he pushes the feelings aside, albeit strong as ever.

El has had enough to deal with, and Mike knows she might not have room for anything else but grief for awhile.

At least, though, he can just be there. To comfort her.

Gently, Mike rubs his thumb along the inside of El's palm, tracing the lines that are well-worn from him doing the same thing countless times before. It's a small gesture, but he hears El exhale in a way that almost sounds like relief.

On pure intuition, Mike takes his free hand and begins stroking El's hair. Over the past six months, he's learned that taking his fingers and lightly running them through her honey-brown strands has always seemed to calm her down. And, although he can't see her face, Mike notices when El's body relaxes and her breathing slows. Her shoulders, tensed up before, sink into the sheets. She exhales again, slower this time.

Mike doesn't know how long he sits there, stroking El's hair, until Jonathan opens the door.

"Hey, um, Mike, I should probably drive you home. It's past midnight."

"Okay. I'll-I'll be out in one minute."

"Alright," Jonathan whispers back and shuts the door.

Mike takes in a shaky breath and forces himself to swallow the lump in his throat. He knew he eventually would have to leave, he just didn't want to come to terms with the fact. Mike looks down at El. She appears much calmer now, almost on the edge of sleep. At least she might be at peace for a little while, in her slumber.

He knows it's about time for him to go, but before he does, he squeezes El's hand one last time. Slowly, without thinking about it,

like his heart is telling him to do it, he pushes the hair away from her ear and moves in close.

He whispers. "El, there's nothing I can say or do to make what happened any different, and I wish, I really wish I could. I...I just want you to know that I am so, so sorry." He blinks back tears for the thousandth time.

"And, if you ever need me, anytime at all, I'm going to be here. I'll always be here. Promise."

Mike leans down to kiss the top of her head. Slowly, wanting to spend every last second with her possible, he gets up to leave.

He's almost to the door when he hears El speak for the first time that night.

"Mike?"

He turns around in shock, almost in disbelief that she's awake and she's talking, talking to *him*. El has turned her body so she's sitting up against the headboard, facing him.

He stares at her, blinking, frozen.

El bites her lip, looks down at Jonathan's flannel blanket, and looks back up at him again.

She barely whispers it, but Mike hears every word.

"...Can you stay?"

Her voice cracks on "stay" and a single tear rolls down her cheek as she says it. And just like that, Mike's heart breaks in two. But he's still frozen, in shock of the turn of events.

El doesn't realize this, however, and thinks Mike is hesitating. "Please?" Another tear, down the other cheek.

Finally, Mike is snapped out of his reverie. "Yes. Yeah, El. Of course. Yes, I-I can stay. I *will* stay. I just need to go tell Jonathan."

"Hurry."

And he hurries. He rushes to the kitchen where Jonathan is waiting as fast as he possibly can without waking Joyce or Will. Jonathan is sitting at the kitchen table, holding his car keys.

"Hey, Mike, are you ready to—"

"I'm staying with El tonight."

Jonathan is taken aback for a second and stares at Mike. "...You—"

"I know, I know. My mom is expecting me. But can you do me a favor and just call her, please? Tell her I'm staying here tonight. I—" he looks at Jonathan seriously. "I can't leave El."

Mike expects an argument coming on, but to his surprise, Jonathan just nods. "Alright. I'll call your mom. Just...get some sleep okay? And try to help her get some rest, too. You both need it."

"I will." Mike turns to walk away, but he turns back at the last second.

"Jonathan?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you."

Jonathan nods and smiles. "Don't mention it. I know how much she means to you. And how much you mean to *her*."

The unexpected compliment leaves Mike momentarily choked up. He doesn't know how to react, so he just smiles. Jonathan returns the smile, a warmth in his eyes that makes him understand why Will has such unfaltering trust in him.

"Thank you. Alright, um, I'm gonna go to El now. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Mike returns back to El as quick as he can. He opens the door and El

is laying on her back now, with her eyes closed. They flutter open when Mike sits down on the edge of the bed and takes her hand.

El takes Mike's hand and brings it to her face. Her eyes close as she rests her cheek against the back of his palm. For a minute, El just stays there in that position, eyelashes tickling Mike's skin.

Then, she removes his hand. Mike's heart drops, suddenly feeling cold with the loss of contact. But, then, El's lashes flutter open, and her brown eyes bore into his.

"Hold me?"

By the look in her eyes, she's practically begging, but she doesn't have to. As Mike slowly lays down beside her and encircles his arms around her torso, he realizes he's been aching to do this for *hours*. Every cell in his body has been itching to just *hold her*.

And when Mike does, the way El's body immediately relaxes makes it seem like she had wanted the same thing, too. She just might not have realized it until now.

El turns in closer to Mike and slides her arm around his waist. She throws her left leg over his, putting herself into a sort of "half-hug" positon. Finally, she lifts her head, and it lands to rest on Mike's chest.

Mike doesn't think he's ever felt so many emotions at once. Holding El like this, it's just....so special. He feels her warmth and he can feel her heartbeat and he just revels in being this *close* to her. But at the same time, his heart is shattering into a million pieces. She lost her father and there's no amount of comforting he can do that can bring him back. He knows it's irrational, but he hates himself for it. He curses himself at the fact that El is going to wake up in the morning and be faced with the horrible reality. And there's nothing he can do to change it, to make her forget.

But he's determined to be at her side through the whole thing.

Mike takes his free hand and brings it up to stroke El's hair again. She exhales, snuggling her head closer, into the crook of Mike's neck. Her

warm breath tickles his skin and he's sworn he's never loved her as much as he does right now.

But then, Mike notices something wrong.

El's hands begin to shake. Mike is confused for a moment when he feels the movement against his chest, but then he hears it.

A muffled sob, against the skin of his neck.

She's shaking everywhere now, and the tears are coming, coming fast before Mike even has time to think.

He pulls his head away to look at her.

"El?"

And his heart breaks when she looks up at him, eyes red and glistening with tears.

"M-Mike."

And she's crying, *really crying*. She collapses onto his chest and cries and cries and cries. She cries for the strength that was once so powerful inside her that's now gone. She cries for Max, who lost her brother. She cries for the fact that what she thought was going to be a beautiful, carefree summer of love morphed into a nightmare in a matter of a few days. But, most of all, she cries for Hopper. She cries for her dad that she lost too soon.

And Mike can't do anything except cry with her.

To say it hurts Mike, to see El in this much pain, is an understatement. It completely, utterly breaks him. It hurts every bone in his body. It obliterates every sense of peace in him and all he can focus on is the girl he'd do anything for, give his *life* for, is falling apart right underneath him.

He holds her tight and rocks her, trying his best to keep himself together even though his heart feels like it's being torn out of him. Eventually, when she has no energy to sob anymore and it reduces to quiet sniffling, Mike places soft kisses on her forehead. He strokes her

hair, murmuring comforting words every once in a while, doing everything in his power to console her.

"El, you're okay. I'm—I'm here. I won't ever leave you, ever," he whispers.

"Promise?" she shuts her eyes as one last tear slides down her cheek.

He presses his lips to her forehead, feeling the warmth there for a moment before moving to tighten his arms around her.

"Promise."

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El is the most tired she's ever been, in every sense of the word.

She's tired physically from her injuries, from overexerting herself over the past 72 hours to save her loved ones. More than that though, she's tired emotionally from the horrible, horrible things that took place in just one night.

But she wants to stay awake for a few more minutes.

She wants to be conscious and feel Mike's arms around her, his fingers stroking her hair, his breath mingling with her own.

Because for the very first time that entire night, she feels safe.

When she wakes up in the morning, she'll cry again for her dad and for Max and Billy and for *everything*. But right now, it's just Mike and El. El and Mike. Keeping each other safe, like they always have. Just simply being *there* for one another, like they always will.

She feels Mike's lips on her temple and loses herself in the warmth his kiss leaves on her skin. Something about that sensation makes her feel even safer, and she burrows deeper into his chest, wanting to get as close to him as humanly possible. She needs him like she needs air.

When his hand begins making small circles on her back, El finally feels her body succumbing to the exhaustion she's felt the past few hours. Her eyelids grow heavy, and she can't even keep herself from letting them fall closed.

She allows herself to breathe and fall into the embrace of sleep, even though she's afraid. She's afraid of what nightmares are going to inevitably come tonight, and countless more nights, again and again like a music box that never stops playing. But she has him. She has him right *here*, and that's what allows her to trust herself to fall into the dark cave that is sleep.

And when she finally feels her consciousness fading away into the quiet of the night, the last thing that passes through her mind is one beautiful word. The word that Mike taught her and the one she'll always think of when life hurts her in a way she can't comprehend. The word that gives her hope, even when she's been broken time and time again.

*Promise.*

## **2. Author Update & Thank You**

Hi everyone! I just wanted to say thank you for your reviews so far. I'm so glad people liked it, I worked really hard and put a lot of emotion into it. So thank you! And if you haven't reviewed, PLEASE DO! I don't care if you hated it or loved it, I always love to find out what anyone thought. Okay, that's all!